

Walking With God in Silence and Solitude

I want to do a completely unscientific poll this morning. How many of us are busy? If there is one word that describes modern life it is busy. All of our conveniences and technological advances don't help us do less. They just enable us to do more.

When we run into someone you haven't seen in awhile, and you ask, "How are you doing?" If they don't say, "Fine." Chances are they will say, "So busy." Slammed. Just keeping my head above water. We say it like a complaint, but we also wear it like a badge of honor, to use a word of recent coinage a whinebrag. You see much of our busyness we do to ourselves. We've added those things to our schedule. We're running to 15 things we encouraged our kids to be in. Our busyness says we're important and needed.

Columnist Tim Kreider writes in his article *The 'Busy' Trap*:

Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day.ⁱ

Our lives are not just busy. They are noisy. We have noisy jobs. We have noisy kids. We work in our yards and shops with noisy tools. If you live or work in town, even the quiet times are filled with the sound of traffic, the blare of sirens, and that evil spawn of Satan and OSHA- the back-up beeper. We wear earbuds that block out the background noise, but then pump more noise into our ears. George Prochnik, author of *In Search of Silence*, writes, "we're seeing noise tied to a host of problems of the age—problems of attention, aggression, insomnia, and general stress. Noise is now the default position as a society."ⁱⁱ

Daily life is filled with alerts, alarms, and notifications— a never ending parade of beeps and dings to get us on to the next thing on our busy agenda. Pick our kid up from practice, take the dinner out of the oven, that person you haven't talked to in three years wants to you check on Facebook so you can see what they're having for dinner, read this email, respond to this text, answer this call. It never ends.

True story, I was reading an article about how annoying all these notifications are. No kidding, the website where I was reading this article pops up a notification asking my permission to show me notifications.

This morning, we want to talk about a very ancient solution to what we think is a very modern problem. But the truth is it's nothing new. Sure, we experience it in modern ways, but I think if you were walking around the streets of ancient Jerusalem, or Antioch, or Rome you could find plenty of people whose lives were filled with hurry, scurry, and worry.

We're doing a series called *Walking with God* where we are exploring spiritual habits for ordinary people. These habits are biblical practices that enable a deeper relationship with God, help us grow spiritually, and help us to get more from, and give more to, life. From ancient times these practices have been called spiritual disciplines. They are time-honored, proven, effective ways to better walk with God.

This morning we want to look at a pair of habits called silence and solitude. While it's possible to look at these as separate practices, they are so closely linked, that it serves us well to consider them together. Silence helps create solitude, and it can be hard to find solitude without silence.

Silence and solitude are all about making space— making space both in our hearts and in lives for God to do deeper things within us. Silence and solitude are as essential to our spiritual formation as is fellowship. Just as we need times of community with joyful celebration, we also need times to withdraw in quiet reflection and meditation

Of course our example for this is Jesus. Silence and solitude played a crucial role in Jesus' life and ministry. In Mark 1 we read about a very busy day in Jesus' life. It begins in the morning in verse 21 with Jesus teaching in the synagogue where people were amazed at how he taught with such authority. He then cleansed a man of an evil spirit. After synagogue is over, he goes with his disciples to the home of Simon Peter where he heals Peter's mother-in-law. Once Peter's mother-in-law is healed, Mark says she got up and began to serve them. It's talking about dinner. She's making them a meal. So Jesus has already had a full day. This is when most of us would be calling it a day. Verse 32 then says,

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons.

After a very busy night, we presume Jesus went to bed very late. Jesus was busy. He was slammed. People had been clamoring for his attention all day. But listen to what John-Mark writes next in verses 35-37:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Everyone's looking for Jesus. They want him to do this, and they want him to do that. And you know what? Jesus didn't care. He needed time with his Father. Never let the urgent become the enemy of the important. This wasn't just a one-time thing for Jesus. It was a regular habit. It was his practice. We might even say it was a spiritual discipline.

Listen to what Doctor Luke writes in Luke 5:15-16, *"Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."*

If even the Son of God needed times of silence and solitude, don't you think we need them too? My whole point this morning is this: we all need places of solitude. We need quiet places. We need places where we can escape all that crowds in upon us in life and disconnects us from our Heavenly Father.

Why

For silence and solitude to become an essential part of our spiritual habits, we need to understand the why. It can be hard for a people who are always plugged in to seek silence and solitude. Our lives are a constant stream of information, audio and video. It used to be just the radio and television. Now it's our phones and laptops and Amazon Alexas and Google Homes. It's Netflix, Youtube and Pandora, and all the podcasts on Stitcher.

We avoid solitude because we fear loneliness. The fear of being left alone is primal, and is one of the earliest fears we experience in childhood. We seek noise and crowds just so we won't be alone, but loneliness still isolates the soul no matter how many people are around. The discipline of solitude is not a call to loneliness. It's not about being alone; It's about being alone with God. There is a huge difference.

Loneliness is a place absent of love and affection. A silent solitude with God is a time and place where his love is known more deeply and His divine, tender affection are experienced more intimately.

The only reason we disconnect with others through the practice of silence and solitude are so that we can connect with God. We seek silence and solitude not to be alone. We seek silence and solitude to be alone with God. What happens when you fall in love? What do you want when you are in love? You want to be with the one you love. It's not just a desire. It can feel like a desperate need. It's not enough to be with them in a big group of friends. It's not enough to go out as a family. You want to be together with them alone. Let's go somewhere by ourselves. Let's just be together you and I. Silence and solitude is about being in love with God. It's having a date night with God- just you and your Creator and Savior. That is why we seek silence and solitude.

What

Next comes the what. What do we do during our time of silence and solitude? This part might be hard for us to grasp, because we always have an agenda, a list of things to get done. We always want to be doing something useful. At the end of something, we want to feel like we accomplished something.

Bill Gaultiere is a Christian psychologist who has devoted his life to soul care and listen to what he says about our what we are trying to accomplish in silence and solitude, "The point of your time in solitude and silence is to do nothing and don't try to make anything happen. Do nothing. Don't try to make anything happen."

It is a time to be, not do. As Alan Ahlgrim, our keynote speaker at the conference a couple of weeks ago kept reminding us. We are human beings, not human doings. In silence and solitude it is a time to stop doing, stop producing, stop pleasing people, stop entertaining yourself, and stop obsessing...about everything, and simply be with God. In silence and solitude you don't need to fix anything, answer anything, or resolve anything.

Go back to my date night with God analogy. Our best times alone with someone are often not the times scheduled by an itinerary full of activities. Intimacy is not built by checking off a list on an agenda. Slow down. Stop. Be quiet, and simply be. Be with Him.

One author says it's the opposite of spacing out. It is to spacing-in. Disconnect, unprompted, desocialized. It is to go totally analog and completely organic in your relationship with God. You don't need a prayer list or a study plan. It's being completely in that moment. Not posting it on Facebook. Not sharing it with anyone, but simply being with God.

It is from here we can accept God's invitation, "Be still and know that I am God." A part of the discipline of silence is not just seeking the quiet of everything around us; it is learning to be quiet ourselves. We need to learn to silence our own racing thoughts and the inner voices that scream within us. It's not that we don't pray or talk to God in our silence and solitude, but we learn to pray from a quiet heart. It is here where we can pray, where we can listen, where we can learn. Or it can simply be enough to enjoy being with him.

Where

The next question that presses in against us is this: where? Where can I find this mystical place of silence and solitude?

This answer will be different for each of us. Find a place where you can be free of distraction and focus on God. It begins with being able to find small places of silence and solitude in our daily lives. It might be in your back yard. It might be a room in your house. It might sound silly, but it might be your shower. Do you realize that for many people the shower is the only time in their day where they are not connected. Except for 5 minutes a day we are plugged in, online, and on-call. Sara Wilson told me about one of you ladies in her Sunday School class who uses their lunch time at work to go to their car and they eat in their car, and read their Bible. That's a creative way to find a quiet place in a busy day.

Sometimes, though we need more than five minutes here or thirty minutes there. We need that date with God. Where do we go for that. I'll give you just a couple of practical pointers. First, it is helpful to go somewhere. A change of scenery can help you disconnect from everything else. Jesus went somewhere. He withdrew to someplace. He went somewhere, usually a desolate place the Bible calls it, where the disciples had a hard time finding him. I've get to get out of Dodge. When I need an extended time with God, it can't be the home or the office. I leave the clutter behind by going somewhere else.

My second practical suggestion on where would be that nature can be helpful. Maybe you're not wired this way, but I find that natural beauty helps me focus on God. Creation channels the Creator. But it doesn't have to be in nature. For you, it might be an unused loft in a barn, a storage building without any phone lines, or in the cab of your truck. It can be anywhere.

When I was in college, it was the ruins of lead and zinc mines from WWI that peppered the area surrounding Joplin and Webb City. The chat piles formed a desolate landscape that seemed from some alien terrain far away from the pressures of finals, the inconsideration of dorm mates, and the temptations of girls that ruled my life only a few miles away. There, I could be alone, and I learned to be alone with God.

In my first ministry, it was a tree stump near a creek on Dorothy Brazle's farm. Dorothy was an elderly widow in the church with whom I ate lunch once a week, and there on her farm I found a respite from the demands of ministry. In Iowa, I could pay a couple of dollars and enjoy a few hours of tropical paradise inside the dome of a botanical center. In Virginia, it was the scenic vistas off Skyline Drive in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In Oklahoma, it was in a homemade tree stand with a lawn chair tucked in the woods far away from anyone or anything except God's handiwork. Here, I've found some lovely spots at Falling Waters or I have a perfect little spot at Sequiota park in Springfield.

The where, though, isn't just about the physical location. It's also about the space you create. You need to create your own space. You can find the most beautiful spot, but if your phone is constantly going off, it will do you no good. I know my wife doesn't like it if I spend the whole date on the phone. Do you think it's any better when we're alone with God?

Turn your phone off. Leave it in the car. Leave it at home, but get rid of the distraction. I'm all for Bible apps on our phone, but time alone with God is one time I would highly recommend a paper Bible. It's just too easy to get sidetracked on your phone. Even if you put it in airplane mode, the allure of distraction is too great. You start off reading Philippians, and next thing you know you're playing Minecraft. So you help create your own space.

When

The last question I want to answer this morning is when? How often do we need to withdraw to a lonely place? It says Jesus often did this. How often do we need to seek solitude and silence.

Those brief respites I spoke of early can become a daily thing: five minutes in the shower. A thirty minute workout can be a wonderful prayer closet. A lunch break in your car. A 15 minute walk and Hidden Waters.

But what about those more protracted periods of silence and solitude. Richard Foster, who literally wrote the book on the spiritual disciplines, *The Celebration of Discipline*, suggests 4 times a year taking half a day or so to spend in silence or solitude.

However, let me just give you some occasions, biblically, where taking a day to spend alone with God might be a good idea.

To Prepare for a Big Challenge or Decision

The first is when you need to prepare for a big challenge or a decision. In Luke 6, Jesus chooses the 12 apostles from all those disciples who were following him. Here's how verses 12 and 13 say he prepared for this crucial decision.

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.

We may recall how the night before his crucifixion Jesus sought the solace of Gethsemane.

So, let's say you're considering a job change, asking someone to marry you, quitting your job and going back to school, or there's a huge relationship issue that needs to be addressed and a years-long friendship is on the line, consider spending a few hours alone with God.

To Reflect on a Momentous Event in Your Life

On the flip-side you might need to spend time alone with God after a momentous event you your life. You just got married. You just had a baby. You just got hired. We might protest thinking, "I can't take time now," but it's often after those big moments where we are most vulnerable. That's when we get so busy that we lose perspective. Ironically, it's when our time and attention are most in demand that we most desperately need to pull away for a bit.

We already saw in Mark 1 how Jesus spent the morning alone in prayer after a long night of ministry. In Matthew 14:23 after Jesus fed the 5,000 and the crowd wanted to make him king, we read this, "*And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.*" The more the pressure and demands of life pressed in on Jesus, the more he needed to draw deeply from the well of his relationship with the Father.

To Respond to a Grievous or Tragic Event

Another time we may need to seek silence and solitude is in response to a grievous or tragic event. In Matthew 14 Jesus loses his dear friend and cousin, John the Baptist. John was beheaded by Herod as a part of an attention getting stunt to please a pretty girl. Verse 13 says, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself."

I know in our culture we often respond to grief and tragedy by surrounding ourselves with family and friends, and that's good, but a healthy part of the grieving process can be spending some hours alone with God, especially if it's accompanied by fasting as Shawn talked about a couple of weeks ago. This isn't to go wallow in your sadness, it is to seek the company and affection of the One who knows you best and loves you the most. There's nothing wrong with telling all your friends and family, "Hey, I need this one day. I need this morning, or this afternoon. I'll be alright, but I need you to let me be."

To Simply Rest

A final occasion where we should seek the solace of a quiet place is simply to rest. Sometimes your soul simply needs time to refresh and renew in the presence of God. We know that our minds get exhausted and our bodies get weary, but we aren't just mind and body. We are mind, body, and soul.

In Mark 6 Jesus had sent his disciples out two by two proclaiming that people should repent. The went from village to village preaching and healing the sick and casting out demons. We pick up the story in verse 30,

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest awhile." For many were coming and doing, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves."

We are always connected, always plugged in and always online. But the thing is we are connected, but disengaged, online but isolated. We are alone together, lost in the crowd. Our constant connections not only disconnect us from each other, they can disconnect us from God. It can be hard to "be still and know that he is God," when we are a constant flurry of activity trying to do a dozen things at once. It can be hard to hear His still, small voice when we are awash in the digital dissonance and unceasing cluttering and clacking of modern life.

This is your invitation to quiet. It is your invitation to de-stress and de-clutter your soul. This is your invitation to fall in love with God all over again, or maybe for the very first time. Think about this: the Creator of the universe wants to be alone with you. Yes, I realize God is everywhere at once, but you know what I mean. He desires that time with you where it's just you and him.

I want to challenge you to do two things this week. First, find a daily and regular quiet place. This is for that brief period where you can get a few minutes. The shower, your commute, 10 minutes while the kids are in the tub, wherever and whenever in the day you can find it. In your sermon insert you see a line there that says, "My Daily Quiet Place." You write this there.

The second line says, "My date with God" and it says "where" and "when" I want to challenge you to schedule a three to four hour period to be alone with God. You need to pick a time and a place. You don't have to fill this out now, but take it with you. Think about it. Pray about it. Talk to your family about it, but I encourage you- do it. Please, do it. And then I would love to hear the stories of where you go and how it goes.

ⁱ <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/30/the-busy-trap/>

ⁱⁱ Holly Pevzner, "Silence," Real Simple, July 2011